

## Shelley's Self-Conscious Art: A Rhetorical Study of *The Cenci*

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"Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak  
Whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.

*Macbeth* 4. 3. 212ff.

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#### A Rhetorical Study of *The Cenci*

In his Preface to *The Cenci* Shelley makes the oft quoted assertion that "Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of moral passion."<sup>1</sup> This neo-platonic metaphor for poetic creativity does reveal an important aspect of Shelley's attitude toward the medium of language itself. He feels, first of all, that language can objectify thoughts more faithfully than other media. As he observes in "A Defense of Poetry," language is a more direct representation of the actions and passions of our internal being, and is susceptible of more various and delicate combinations than colour, form, or motion . . . ."<sup>2</sup> This stance of course cannot be surprising in one who is, himself, a poet. Yet in Shelley's case the implications are somewhat broader because, more than other writers of his time, Shelley makes symbolic statements about language in his poetry. We think of the emphasis given to Prometheus' curse in Shelley's lyrical drama, *Prometheus Unbound*. After Prometheus decides that he must hear again the curse he wishes to recall (l. 59, 70), it takes the Earth and other nature spirits some two hundred lines to describe the awful consequences of the utterance which is finally rehearsed in forty powerful lines by the Phantasm of Jupiter (262-300). Ironically, in spite of the awe surrounding his deliberate verbal defiance, Prometheus concludes that "words are quick and vain," (303) choosing

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci, Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Oxford University Press, 1904).

<sup>2</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry," *Prose*, vol. 7, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (New York: Gordion Press, 1965), 113.

the better fortitude of renunciation.

Aside from the ritualistic attitude toward language that underlies the treatment of Prometheus' curse, particularly in light of his symbolic gift of language to men, we find other noteworthy comments about the significance of language here and in other poems. In Act 2 Demogorgon announces that "the deep truth is imageless" (116) while in Act 4 language is again celebrated as

A perpetual Orphic song  
Which rules with Daedal harmony a throng  
Of thoughts and forms which else senseless and shapeless were (415-17).

Similarly, where Shelley himself confesses the futility of words, being "ineffectual and metaphorical," in his essay "On Love,"<sup>3</sup> Ahasuerus in *Hellas* regards words as eternal: "All is contained in each" (792).

It is not so much that language has a particular doctrinal value for Shelley but rather that, as a poet who is by nature rhetorically self-conscious, Shelley consistently has his eye on possibilities for the function and meaning of language in his longer dramatic and semi-dramatic works. We shall see that that, on the one hand, *The Cenci* is very Elizabethan in its sophisticated and self-conscious use of rhetoric, occasionally echoing passages from Shakespeare's greatest plays. On the other we will find that focus on language and rhetoric becomes a virtual motif in this play, consistent with Shelley's own philosophical interest in his medium of words.<sup>4</sup>

Our purpose in the discussion below, then, is to consider Shelley's use of rhetoric and his orientation toward language as a motif in *The Cenci*, an Elizabethan style tragedy with a Jacobean revenge plot. Such an approach will foreground and explain specific character traits in Count Cenci and Beatrice. It will also show the extent to which Shelley's own artistic self-consciousness informs the portrait of these two figures and approaches the level of theme in the drama itself.

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<sup>3</sup> *Prose*, 6, 202.

<sup>4</sup> Wasserman notes in his discussion of the play that, in the character of Giacomo, Shelley focuses on the inimical consequences of "verbalizing the thoughts beneath the brain" Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 112-115.

Stuart Curran has suggested that, of all the characters, Shelley is “stylistically more comfortable” with Cenci.<sup>5</sup> On a closer view, we find that this point is related to a second observation of Curran’s pertaining to the banquet scene, that “the Count is an artist, conscious of his every effect, careful of the placement of accents on this canvas over which he is master, relishing each bold and dramatic stroke.”<sup>6</sup> The fact is that Cenci comes forward as a masterful rhetorician in his first speech in the play. His rhetorical control over the situation is seen in the way he mocks Camillo by using the latter’s own words against him with the figure of metastasis.<sup>7</sup> Camillo, speaking for the Pope, mentions the latter’s reservation that in pardoning Cenci, he has “respited from hell / An erring soul which might repent and live—“(1.1.7-8). The count himself has little patience for such scruples and expresses the notion with contempt: “—it angers me! /Respited me from Hell!—So may the Devil/ Respite their souls from Heaven” (25-6).

By echoing the remark of his opponent and then adapting it for parody in this way, Cenci illustrates a vestige of stichomythia, the highly stylized form of rhetorical thrust and counter-thrust prevalent in early Renaissance drama.<sup>8</sup> However, Camillo himself soon comes to feel that the count is talking “over” rather than with him when he interrupts himself to ask, “Talk with me, Count,—you know I mean you well”(47). Yet Cenci’s effect on the Cardinal becomes increasingly hard for the latter to control, and Camillo’s third and fourth responses are an outburst: “Thou execrable man, beware!”(65) and “Art thou not most miserable?”(91). In both cases Cenci calmly dismisses Camillo’s impassioned accusation with the figure of correction, epanorthosis, as in this second instance: “Why miserable?—/ No, I am what your theologians call / Hardened” (92-4).

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Curran, *Shelley’s “Cenci”: Scorpions Ringed with Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Curran, 73.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577, 1593) a facs. Reprod. (Gainesville: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1954), 181.

<sup>8</sup> The wooing scene (I.ii) in Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (1597) is a famous example of this.

The calculating, deliberative tone preserved here by Cenci, as though they were debating over application of terms, contrasts to the middle of the speech when the Count alludes to a new possibility for sadistic pleasure. He does not yet name the deed he has in mind: “And but there yet remains to act / Whose horror might make sharp an appetite / Duller than mine—I’d do—I know not what” (100-103). The breaking off of speech in this fashion—aposiopesis—signifies in dramatic convention the presence of high passion or pathos.<sup>9</sup> We think of Lear’s stunned anger: “I will do such things—What they are, yet, I know not,” the diction of which Shelley may have had in mind here.<sup>10</sup> Similarly when in Act 3 Beatrice fails to name the violation she is made to suffer, considerably more emotion is present than with Cenci: “But never fancy imaged such a deed / As . . . (3.1.55-6).

Cenci’s demurring to name the act he anticipates in 1.1 does admittedly show a loss of rhetorical control, but here it seems more a matter of dramatizing the inception of his plan. The situation also reminds us of the early scenes of *Macbeth* where the protagonist “yields” to the “suggestion” of a “horrid image” which he does not yet admit to the realm of conscious purpose (1.3.134ff):

. . . why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
Against the use of nature?

Unlike Macbeth, of course, Cenci does not allow the “horrid image” to “unfix” his hair and, accordingly, he maintains the upper hand, both rhetorically and otherwise, when Camillo parts from him.

When left alone in this same scene, Cenci proceeds to make an interesting testimony to the power inherent in words. After addressing God with the wish that his sons be quickly struck down, (1.1.134) he broaches the subject of Beatrice only to interrupt himself with the thought that someone might hear. Though he rationalizes that he need not articulate this new plan for torture, he confesses that “the heart triumphs with itself in words” (139). He ends the scene with a Macbethian apostrophe to the

<sup>9</sup> Peacham, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *King Lear*, 2.4.275-6.

air and pavement, bidding them to reveal his self-confidence but not his intent:

O thou most silent air, that shalt not hear  
 What now I think! Thou pavement, which I tread—  
 Towards her chamber,—let your echoes talk  
 Of my imperious step scorning surprise,  
 But not of my intent!—Andrea! <sup>11</sup> (140-44)

Cenci's prayer for his sons' death, his admission of the heart's vicarious joy in words, and his metaphoric fear that the silent air may hear "What now I think," foreground a self-conscious and ritualistic approach to language in the play. For Cenci the incantatory potential of language finds ultimate expression in his curse of Beatrice. In 4.1 Shelley prepares us for the climactic moment of the curse in a manner which anticipates the rehearsal of Prometheus' curse in Act I of *Prometheus Unbound*. Here Lucretia and Beatrice have tried to maneuver the Count to repentance by relating that visionary voices have said, "Cenci must die" (34). For a moment the Count is actually unsettled, recalling that his own words seem already to have functioned as a medium between the human and divine:

Why—such things are . . .  
 No doubt revealings may be made.  
 'Tis plain I have been favoured from above,  
 For when I cursed my sons they died . . . (37-40)

Though he continues to reflect on the efficacy of his previous curse, "Ay, . . . Rocco and Christofano my Curse / Strangled," (46-7). Still, Cenci remains defiant that Beatrice will die "blaspheming." And it is only when his wife then admits that the visionary voices were a ruse to stop him, that we see his true sacrilege and hypocrisy: he rebukes Lucretia as a "Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God / Be thy soul choked with that blaspheming lie!" (73-4). It is also interesting that Cenci does not rebuke Lucretia for her deceit to him but instead for misrepresenting something connected with God, a God which, incidentally, he associates with the written and spoken word rather than a mystical presence,

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<sup>11</sup> This parallel was among the first to be cited by critics. Curran offers a useful chart tabulating the principal parallels and echoes to Shakespeare. Cf. page 38.

benevolent or otherwise. We recall that it was “the word of God” he calls “to witness” in the banquet scene when proclaiming the fortuitous murder of his sons (1.3.55).

Cenci goes further to emphasize that Lucretia’s crime is false testimony rather than disloyalty to him personally, and he does so with an interesting use of catachresis (implied metaphor). He curses her, “Be thy soul choked with that blaspheming lie” where the juxtaposition of “soul” and “choked” denotes both that the crime was committed with words and that its effects are everlasting.<sup>12</sup> The implied image of the human throat in this brief curse achieves an immediacy reminiscent of Shakespeare and, once again, points to the ritual significance of spoken language.

Critics have regarded Cenci’s actual curse of Beatrice as one of the most stylized and yet, in its own way, as one of the most effective, passages in the play. Curran notes Shelley’s use of long periodic lines<sup>13</sup> while Bates comments on the “cumulative repetition of phrase constructions” (isocolon) along with repetition of key words and phrases (plocé):<sup>14</sup>

God:

Hear me! If this most specious mass of flesh,  
Which Thou hast made my daughter; this my blood,  
This particle of my divided being,  
Or rather, this my bane and my disease  
Whose sight infects and poisons me; this devil  
Which sprung from me as from a hell, was meant  
To aught good use; if her bright loveliness  
Was kindled to illumine this dark world;  
If nursed by Thy selectest dew of love  
Such virtues blossom in her as should make  
The peace of life, I pray Thee for my sake,  
As Thou the common God and Father art  
Of her, and me, and all; reverse that doom!

Thus Cenci apostrophizes God and implores him, by the power of His own name—“As Thou the common

<sup>12</sup> We think of Mowbray to Bolingbroke in Act I of *Richard II*: “as low as to thy heart / Through the false passage of thy throat, thou liest.” Shakespeare makes frequent use of synechdochial throat and tongue images, especially in the early history plays.

<sup>13</sup> Curran, 54-55.

<sup>14</sup> Ernest S. Bates, *A Study of Shelley’s Drama, “The Cenci”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), 88.

God and Father art / Of her and me and all” – to enable Beatrice’s ruin. Then, also in the name of God, he addresses the four elements,<sup>15</sup> commanding that they aid in her undoing:

Earth, in the name of God, let her food be  
Poison, until she be encrusted round  
With leprous stains! Heaven, rain upon her head  
The blistering drops of the Maremma’s dew,  
Till she be speckled like a toad; parch up  
Those love-enkindled lips, warp those fine limbs  
To loathed lameness! All-beholding sun,  
Strike in thine envy those life-darting eyes  
With thine own ending beams! (128-35)

The resemblance between this curse and that pronounced by Lear on his daughters has long been attested by critics.<sup>16</sup> And, among the images in this speech which represent, according to Curran, “a culmination of nearly every symbolic thread in the play,”<sup>17</sup> we find another reference to the archetypal value of language as embodied in the curse. With the allusion to Job whom Shelley clearly has in mind in the details of “leprous” stains, “blistering” drops and a “head” on which destruction is sent,<sup>18</sup> our attention is directed to the biblical hero whose own emphatic curses, pronounced on everything but God himself, are the precedent for this expression of pathos.

Lucretia in this scene is so overcome with the power of Cenci’s rhetoric in the curse that she begs him with great passion: “Peace! Peace! . . . unsay those dreadful words” (137-8). Nor is the Count unimpressed with his own declamation. When he extends the curse to include a hideous offspring, he mentions God’s “words” in juxtaposition to his own: Alluding to Gen. 1:28, he says that nature would thus be “fulfilling his command / And my deep imprecation!” (144-45). Cenci enjoys his rhetoric so much that he then becomes half-playful, asking himself, “Shall I revoke this curse?” (158)<sup>19</sup> and proceeds to send a taunting message to Beatrice, “Go bid her come, / Before my words are chronicled in Heaven”

<sup>15</sup> Curran, 119.

<sup>16</sup> Desmond King-Hele, *Shelley: His Thought and Work* (Teaneck: Farleigh-Dickinson University Press, 1960), 128

<sup>17</sup> Curran, 118.

<sup>18</sup> Shelley’s conception of Job also echoes *Othello*, 4.2.48-9.

<sup>19</sup> The famous wooing scene of *Richard III*, 1.2. comes briefly to mind here, where Gloucester marvels at what his eloquence has been able to accomplish with the widow of the man he has killed.



(159).

Appropriately, this second curse marks Cenci's last appearance on stage, representing as it does, a climactic embodiment of the rhetorical and psychological power he wields. Nor would Shelley have us view Beatrice's refusal to come at his command as an effective defiance of that power. Beatrice by now has long been out of the realm of rhetorical combat with Cenci, and in having resigned herself to murder at the end of Act 3, she has, in a larger sense, already admitted defeat. The reply she sends by means of Lucretia is more than slightly ironic: "She bids thee curse; / And if thy curses, as they cannot do, / Could kill her soul . . . ." (167-8). Thus Lucretia cannot finish the assertion, and the scene closes with a final rhetorical victory for Cenci who apostrophizes Hell and envisions Beatrice's fall:

O multitudinous Hell, the fiends will shake  
Thine arches with the laughter of their joy!  
There shall be lamentation heard in Heaven  
As o'er an angel fallen . . .` (183-6)

In an important sense, then, Cenci does emerge in this play as the artist supreme whose "heart triumphs with itself in words" (1.1.139). In this connection, the audience recalls Giacomo's earlier point that, granted the finality of death, even for a tyrant like Cenci, "do you not think his ghost / Might plead that argument with God?" (3.2.52-3).

The character of Beatrice is decidedly more complex than that of Count Cenci, and the result is a variety of critical approaches to her. On one level, Beatrice is the innocent, suffering one, a view that Shelley himself encourages in dwelling on her portrait, attributed to Guido, in the Preface. Yet she also emerges as the "winged Justice" bent on vengeance with a determination that does not waver once she is resolved to murder in Act 3. There is also the problem, often cited, of reconciling the Beatrice of both the early and later scenes of the drama.<sup>20</sup> Ernest Bates points out that, whatever Beatrice may personify at given moments in the play, "her courage, independence, gentleness," and, significantly, her "poetic eloquence—spring unmistakably from the temperament of the poet himself."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Curran, 52, Seymour Reiter, *A Study of Shelley's Poetry* (University of New Mexico Press, 1967), 201, and Moody E. Prior, *The Language of Tragedy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), 230-31

And if Beatrice is seen as the embodiment of a quality uniquely the domain of the poet, namely her eloquence, we must regard it along with her oratorical skill, as a “constant” of her portrayal which, viewed against the ensuing actions of the play, may both explain and intensify her character.<sup>22</sup>

One problem with the delineation of Beatrice’s character is that we see relatively little of her before she comes under the pathological influence of the violation. Yet what we do see and hear of her beforehand attests to her verbal sophistication and skill. Her first stage appearance finds her speaking with Orsino who tries to convince her of his love, and we cannot help but note how Beatrice, like her father in the previous scene, is rhetorically in control. She begins with what is really an accusation, admonishing Orsino, “Pervert not the truth,” (1.2.1) referring to their conversations from two years past. Though less impassioned than Cenci when he charges Lucretia, “Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God,” in 4.1, her habit of mind, even this early in the play, is seen to resemble his. Moreover, Beatrice remains self-sufficient in her verbal sparing with Orsino: “Speak not to me of love,” she tells him, and after his second attempt, “As I have said, speak not to me of love” (14).

Orsino soon gives up the greater point of a romantic conquest, at least temporarily, and tries his eloquence on the matter of the Papal petition:

You know  
My zeal for all you wish, sweet Beatrice:  
Doubt not but I will use my utmost skill  
So that the Pope attend to your complaint. . . . (39-42)

Beatrice, however, replies with a rhetorical maneuver that parallels what her father had used with Cardinal Camillo in the scene before. Employing metastasis, she mocks him by seizing on his own words: “Your zeal for all I wish;--Ah me, you are cold! / Your utmost skill . . . speak but one word . . .” (43-4). Though Beatrice is momentarily sobered unlike her father who mocked the Pope’s pious reservations, Shelley is able to show that, being rhetorically sensitive and sophisticated as they are,

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<sup>21</sup> Bates, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Newman I White feels that *The Cenci* lacks character development in the classical sense *Shelley*,<sup>2</sup> (London: Secker and Warburg, 1947), 140.

Cenci and Beatrice both marvel at the blatant hypocrisy of those around them. Beatrice here realizes how friendless and isolated she is in such a world, and despite Orsino's duplicity, she confides a portion of her sufferings to him.

Beatrice's sophistication and skill in communication are not lost upon Orsino, however. In the soliloquy which closes the scene, he decides that the Pope must not "read her eloquent petition" (68) since he would most likely be moved by it, and he accuses Beatrice of deliberate amplification: "In all this there is much exaggeration" (73). Having confessed a certain fear of Beatrice's "subtle mind" and seeming ability to "lay bare" his own darker motives, Orsino must finally rouse himself: "I were a Fool . . . If she escape me" (89-91).

Having established Beatrice's gift for communication and argument, a gift she no doubt owes to her father, we have to examine their verbal interactions for further insights. We see that Beatrice's sophistication proves tragically incisive as she listens to Cenci's duplicitous speech at the banquet in I. 3:

If, when a parent from a parent's heart  
Lifts from this earth to the great Father of all  
A prayer, both when he lays him down to sleep,  
And when he rises up from dreaming it;  
One supplication, one desire, one hope,  
That he would grant a wish for his two sons . . . (22-17)

In spite of Cenci's dignified eloquence, it is Beatrice alone who recognizes the true import:

"Great God! How horrible! Some dreadful ill / Must have befallen my brothers" (32-3). Others are taken in by his speech though Lucretia is somewhat skeptical, ("He speaks too frankly").

But it is Beatrice who recognizes Cenci's rhetorical artifice for what it is. She knows that such language could not be used by him except in jest, so she relies instead on her skill in physiognomy: "I fear that wicked laughter round his eye, / Which wrinkles up the skin even to the hair" (37-8).

From this point on in the play, we see the contest between Beatrice and Cenci, leading ultimately to the incest and murder, in terms of an interesting interplay of rhetoric and pathos. Initially Beatrice

appears sufficiently daunted by the murder to her brothers to change from an epideictic to a more suppliant tone in her speech. She appeals to the banquet guests to protect her and her mother from Cenci's plans, though without success:

I have born much, and kissed the sacred hand  
Which crushed us to the earth, and have thought its stroke  
Was perhaps some paternal chastisement!  
Have excused much, doubted; and when no doubt  
Remained, have sought by patience, love and tears  
To soften him . . . . (111-116)

Though Beatrice's eloquence is muted by the Count's more biting threats to any who would interfere, she does not yield ground when confronting him immediately afterwards. When he commands her, "Retire to your chamber, insolent girl!" (145) she mocks him with his own language as he had earlier done with Camillo and she with Orsino:

Retire thou, impious man! Ay, hide thyself  
Where never eye can look upon thee more!  
Wouldst thou have honour and obedience  
Who art a torturer? Father, never dream  
Though thou mayst overbear this company,  
But ill must come of ill.—Frown not on me!  
Haste, hide thyself, lest with avenging looks  
My brothers' ghosts should hunt thee from thy seat! (146-53)

Her deliberate echo of Cenci's own words with Shakespearean nuance, her baiting use of rhetorical question, and her own open threat of vengeance from the dead—all confirm just how far Beatrice can go to oppose her father. As Lucretia reminds Beatrice in Act 2, recalling the banquet scene,

You alone stood up, and with strong words  
Checked his unnatural pride; and I could see  
The devil was rebuked that lives in him. (2.1.43-5)

The whole first act represents a careful attempt by Shelley to establish Beatrice and Cenci as equals on the level of rhetoric and imagination. Beginning in Act 2 and ending with the resolution to murder Cenci in 3.2, we do witness a change in what we can call Beatrice's "rhetorical ethos." When

Beatrice enters in Act 2 madly trying to elude the Count, it is clear that she knows of his incestuous design. Milton Wilson points out that the question of how far Cenci succeeds in his projected “corruption” of Beatrice remains ambiguous in the play.<sup>23</sup> Other critics agree, however, that when Beatrice appears in 2.1, Cenci has at least told her of the incest, though not yet fulfilled it.<sup>24</sup> Such a reading is consistent, we note, with the symbolic emphasis Shelley places on language in *The Cenci*: we see Cenci prolonging Beatrice’s torture by first verbalizing his intent—sometime between acts 1 and 2—and then committing it—between 2.3 and 3.1.

If Cenci and Beatrice are equals in imagination and rhetorical ability in the play, Shelley’s challenge will be to objectify the devastation that leads Beatrice to murder without disarming her of what has been established as her rhetorical ethos. Lucretia, for example, notices Beatrice’s distraction for the first time in 2.1 and accuses her of madness. Interestingly Beatrice cites her own control of language to indicate that she is still sound: “You see I am not mad: I speak to you”(33). We think of Hamlet’s similar protest to his mother in the famous closet scene of Act 3: “Bring me to the test / And I the matter will reword; which madness / Would gambol from”(3.4.163-5). Yet Beatrice, though she insists on her ability to speak, seems incapable of naming the outrage committed by her father:

Men like my father, have been dark and bloody,  
Yet never—Oh! Before worse comes of it  
‘Twere wise to die (2.1.54-6)

The Shakespearian passage echoed here from *Macbeth*, “Blood hath been shed ere now . . . and since too, murders have been perform’d / Too terrible for the ear,”(3.4.75-8) emphasizes a theme implicit throughout the first three acts of *The Cenci*, that some evils exceed the power of speech.<sup>25</sup> Beatrice will echo that same passage from *Macbeth* when, later in Act 3, she attempts to approach a name for the deed:

<sup>23</sup> Milton Wilson, *Shelley’s Later Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 146.

<sup>24</sup> King-Hele, 123 and Carlos Baker, *Shelley’s Major Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 146.

<sup>25</sup> This same emphasis is found in Macduff’s response to Duncan’s murder in 2.3.60ff: “Tongue nor heart cannot conceive or name thee.”

Horrible things have been in this wide world,  
 Prodigious mixtures, and confusions strange  
 Of good and ill; and worse have been conceived  
 Than ever there was found a heart to do.  
 But never fancy imaged such a deed  
 As [Pauses, suddenly recollecting herself] ( 3.1.51-6)

In both of Beatrice's Shakespearean speeches we see an attempt to digress from the topic with generalities but finally a breaking off of speech (aposiopesis) representing an inability to "clothe" her suffering in words. Shelley will employ this breaking off of speech at least four more times with Beatrice, the first being as early as 2:1:

Oh! He has trampled me  
 Under his feet, and made the blood stream down  
 My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all  
 Ditch-water, and the fever-stricken flesh  
 Of buffaloes . . .  
 And I have never yet despaired—but now!  
 What could I say? (64-8)

With imagery echoing other Greek tragedies including *Oedipus Rex*, this speech is important because it dramatizes Beatrice's inability to approach the subject of the yet unrealized incest ("—but now!") as well as her inability, seemingly for the first time, to answer Cenci ("What could I say?"). This response is a graphic contrast to her earlier command, "Retire thou, impious man!" (146).

The choric imagery and tone of the lines that follow reaffirm the reality of Beatrice's distraction and apparent loss of control:

How comes this hair undone?  
 Its wandering strings must be what blind me so,  
 And yet I tied it fast.—Oh, horrible!  
 The pavement sinks under my feet! The walls  
 Spin round! I see a woman weeping there . . . (6-10)

Beatrice's loss of control also continues to manifest itself in her inability to name the wrong with which her father has victimized her. In the 135-line dialogue with Orsino, Beatrice's step-mother implores her seven times to confide the cause of her suffering and, at one point, assures her that it cannot be too great or too terrible to preclude a sympathetic response: "Oh, my lost child, / Hide not in proud impenetrable grief / Thy sufferings from my fear"(3.1.104-6). At no point, however, can Beatrice bring herself to name the abuse; she wanders instead among neighboring associations which, when they bring her too close to the actual deed or the "one little word" with which Cenci threatened her between Acts 1 and 2, (2.1.63) cause her to shift her train of thought:

That one who with white hair and imperious brow,  
Who tortured me from my forgotten years,  
As parents only dare, should call himself  
My father, yet should be—Oh, what am I?  
What name, what place, what memory shall be mine? (3.1.71-4).

Toward the end of their encounter she insists "If I try to speak / I shall go mad" (85). And, again, after Lucretia's most passionate entreaty,

Of all words  
That minister to mortal intercourse,  
Which wouldst thou hear? For there is none to tell  
My misery . . . (111-14)

Orsino manages to win Beatrice's commitment to the parricide but only after he to avoid agrees to avoid explicit terms for her abuse. After she rebukes him that no words "might make known the crime of my destroyer,"(3.1.154) he refers only indirectly to it as the "misdeed," the "crime, what'er it is, dreadful no doubt . . ."(173-4). Orsino does encourage Beatrice toward the murder of Cenci, but in the end, he functions only as an instrument, not an agent. Unlike the weak Giacomo who, in the face of punishment later accuses him of urging the murder with "hints and questions,"(5.1.22) Beatrice never yields rhetorical ground by blaming Orsino. Her acquiescence to the murder is correspondingly more tragic and more possibly more symbolic.

Beatrice's emergence in Act 5 as the cunning orator is a problem acknowledged by several critics.<sup>26</sup> Stuart Curran sums up the difficulty when he suggests that "she should not be yanked from the pit of private despair to testify on the public dais."<sup>27</sup> Granted this inconsistency, though, it is clear that Shelley has done much to prepare us for this later example of Beatrice's rhetorical prowess. In Act I it was she whose eloquence worried Orsino and whose "strong words" challenged the wickedness of Cenci as we have seen. In Acts 2 and 3 Beatrice shows signs of distraction and despair but now, with Cenci's death, she acknowledges herself "firm / As the world's center," (4.4.49) so perhaps it is not surprising that she should reclaim verbal mastery of the situation in Act 5.

Faced with the damaging confession of Marzio, she has ample opportunity to display her oratorical skill in response. She employs several figures of argumentation including the analogy with which she cleverly invites Camillo to imagine himself in Marzio's place:

If your fine frame were stretched upon that wheel,  
And you were told "Confess that you did poison  
Your little nephew, that fair blue-eyed child  
Who was the lodestar of your life:"—and though  
All see, since his most swift and piteous death,  
That day and night, heaven and earth, and time,  
And all things hoped for or done therein  
Are changed for you, through our exceeding grief,  
Yet you would say, "I confess anything" (5.2.47-55)

By subtly comparing her own position to that of Camillo in mourning for his nephew, (using *illustratio* to portray the "fair blue-eyed child") Beatrice appeals to emotions that the Cardinal has long suppressed and succeeds, consequently, in moving him to tears (60). The rhetoric she uses with Marzio in the same scene is even more elaborate. She begins by admonishing him,

O, thou who tremblest on the giddy verge  
Of life and death, pause ere thou answerest me;

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<sup>26</sup> Prior, 230-31; Reiter, 201.

<sup>27</sup> Curran, 60.



So mayst thou answer God with less dismay:  
What evil have I done thee? (115-18)

Beatrice here protests her own sincerity as she carefully reminds Marzio of his own salvation in order to ask him what is really an irrelevant question. She then continues with the figure of anamnesis, or the calling of past matters to remembrance:

I alas!  
Have lived out on this earth a few sad years,  
And so my lot was ordered, that a father  
First turned the moments of awakening life  
To drops, each poisoning youth's sweet hopes;  
Stabbed with one blow my everlasting soul  
And my untainted fame; and even that peace  
Which sleeps within the core of the heart's heart. (118-25)

Thus she uses the opportunity of her address to Marzio to appeal, before all who are listening, to the pathos of her own history. It is also clear when she alludes to Marzio's own conscience several lines later, she has an eye on the general response:

If thou hast done murders, made thy life's path  
Over the trampled laws of God and man,  
Rush not before thy Judge and say: "My maker,  
I have done this and more . . ." (134-7).

Beatrice is not above using a more cunning tact when she argues, previously, to the judges, that if she had in fact performed the murder, she would not have been so foolish as to spare Marzio:

do you think  
I should have left this two-edged instrument  
Of my misdeed: this man, this bloody knife  
With my own name engraved on the heft,  
Lying unsheathed amid a world of foes  
For my own death? (96-101)

And Beatrice is defiant when threatened by the Judge:

JUDGE. Confess, Or I will warp  
Your limbs with such keen tortures . . . .

BEATRICE. Tortures! Turn

The rack henceforth into a spinning wheel!

Torture your dog, that he may tell when last

He lapped the blood his master shed . . . not me! (5.3.60-64)

Her characteristic ploy of echoing her opponent's words to mock him recalls her defiance of Cenci in 1.3. and is arguably Shakespearean.<sup>28</sup>

If Beatrice's rhetoric in these scenes is calculated and callous, Moody Prior suggests that we keep in mind here as elsewhere that "philosophical conception of innocence and beauty and courage" that Beatrice represents.<sup>29</sup> Even though she resorts to sophistry and even lies with regard to Marzio, the audience may sense that she is being faithful to her "holier plea": she acts on Shelley's assumption that in "this keen -judging world, this two-edged lie," (4. 4. 115) the letter of the law is often meaningless and even pernicious. By using rhetoric to justify herself in this way, Beatrice, we can argue, does not use language as hypocrisy because she really believes that she is "more innocent of parricide / Than is the child born fatherless" (4.4.112-13).

Beatrice, predictably, goes to her death as the victim of Cenci's depravity and aggression. In spite of the verbal prowess and control she exhibits in her defense, she does not accept her fate without high drama and pathos at the end: "O / My God! Can it be possible I have / To die so suddenly . . . to go / Under the obscure, cold, rotting, wormy ground!" (49-50). Like Oedipus, she contemplates with horror, the prospect of seeing shades of family in the afterlife, though for different reasons: "Let me not go mad! . . . my father's spirit / His eye, his voice, his touch surrounding me" (55-61). As she begins to resolve herself to her fate, she pronounces judgement on the hypocrisy of human justice, in this case, in the person of the Pope, but once again in terms of language: "Cruel, cold formal man; righteous in words, / In deeds a Cain" (108-9).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Iago's contempt for the love-sick Roderigo in *Othello*, 1.3.334ff.

<sup>29</sup> Prior, 230-31.

Beatrice, like her father, maintains her rhetorical power in the drama, even in her despair. Cenci with masterful deceit, acknowledges that the “heart triumphs with itself in words,” (l.1.139) where language becomes a form of indulgence. For Beatrice, words “minister to mortal intercourse”(3.1.111) and represent a tireless though often frustrated search for the truth. Both acknowledge that language can be manipulated for base purposes: Cenci calls Lucretia, “Vile palterer with the sacred truth of God”(4.1.) and Beatrice warns Orsino, “Pervert not truth”(1.2) later telling Marzio, that he must confess to himself: “Because her [Beatrice’s] wrongs could not be told, not thought . . . I with my words killed her and all her kin”(5.2.141-3). For Beatrice, though, there are some evils too terrible to be clothed or imaged in words. Hence she refuses, even under pressure, to name the incest practiced upon her by Cenci. For Shelley this refusal to name the crime seems, on one level, to go hand in hand with Beatrice’s conviction that she was forever stained and violated by the deed, in spite of her powerful speeches before and after. Why else has she resorted to the murder which Shelley regards as among the “pernicious mistakes” that include “revenge” and “atonement”? And in Shelley’s view this failure to understand that no physical act or force can violate the soul, is the true cause of Beatrice’s undoing and also of her failure to attain tragic stature at its highest level.

In this play written by a 19<sup>th</sup> century lyric poet, using a Jacobean revenge plot with both an Elizabethan consciousness of language and use of rhetoric, we have a heroine, ultimately, who, in spite of her ability and potential, bypasses that supreme moment of truth for which Oedipus paid so high a price in Sophocles’ drama since she goes to her death feeling justified rather than humbled by an awareness of her position in the cosmos. But within Shelley’s own spiritual cosmos, had she understood, that, in his own words, “no person can be truly dishonoured by the act of another . . . she would have been wiser and better . . .”<sup>30</sup> The poet’s own sensitivity to language as a philosophical concern in *The Cenci* along with his deft allusion to passages from some of Shakespeare’s greatest

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<sup>30</sup> Percy Shelley, “Preface” *The Cenci*, ed. Ellsworth Barnard, Shelley: *Selected Poems, Essays, and Letters* (New York: Odyssey Press, 1944, 196-7.

plays, facilitate his portrayal of these characters, Beatrice and Count Cenci, who are so complex and interesting in their own right. We can finally say that, in her failure to perceive Shelley's deeper truth, that her soul remains inviolate, resulting in the parricide, Beatrice comes at last to the same plane as her abusive father with whom she has shared the same rhetorical prowess throughout the play.